

A Muse: Noah

“Noah, the tiller of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. He drank of the wine and became drunk, and he uncovered himself within his tent. Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father’s nakedness and told his two brothers outside. But Shem and Japheth took a cloth, placed it against both their backs and, walking backwards, they covered their father’s nakedness; their faces were turned the other way, so that they didn’t see their father’s nakedness. When Noah woke up from his wine and learned what his youngest son had done to him, he said, ‘cursed be Canaan; the lowest slaves shall he be to his brothers.’”
(Genesis 9: 20-25)

Reading this intriguing text one can’t help but wonder what really did happen between Noah and Ham, when Noah laid in his tent drunk? What did Ham do to deserve such a damning curse? From a superficial review of the text it appears that Ham not only saw his father’s nakedness, but that instead of covering him, he went out and told his brothers of the sorry state of their father.

This standard reading of the text is problematic because rather than answer the question it raises an additional one. If Ham’s sin was that he didn’t respond quickly enough in covering his father than why does verse 24 read “when Noah woke up from his wine and learned what his youngest son *had done to him*”? Why is there an emphasis on discovering what Ham did to Noah?

There is an interesting relationship between the story of the Flood and the incident in Sodom. Prior to the flood the text (Genesis 6: 5-7) relates that the “bnei elohim” were engaging in “deviant” sex with the daughters of humankind, (male on female). Prior to the incident of Sodom men were desirous of engaging the angels in “deviant” sex, (male on male) as well. After the flood there was a relationship between Noah and Ham (male on male); after Sodom there was too, a relationship between Lot and his two daughters (women on man). The analogy goes further. At the conclusion of the Deluge Noah becomes willfully inebriated, but at the conclusion of the Sodom episode, the daughters get their father drunk. Noah understood what ham did to him, but Lot has no idea.

Because Noah knows, he curses Canaan, the son of Ham, but Lot not knowing what had occurred, doesn't curse his daughter's progeny. (Midrash Rabbah suggests that Lot knew what his eldest daughter had done and didn't take steps to prevent a similar incident with his youngest daughter the following night.)

Midrash struggled with how to best present the perverse relationship between Noah and Ham, and so there are three alternative versions of what happened, ultimately the third version became the most acceptable: In the first version, midrash suggests that Ham castrated his father in order to insure that the inheritance will be split three ways instead of four ways or more. Our tradition had a difficult time with this version because it didn't fit the image that the text had tried to create about Noah being an "ish tzaddik", the righteous man of his generation. Being the righteous man of his generation he deserved better, so this version was replaced with one less ominous. In the second version Ham sodomized his father, which may be plausible in light of the biblical story of Lot and his daughters. Still, Noah, being the righteous man that he was, was deserving of better treatment and so the third version is the one that our sages were most comfortable with. This third and final version suggests that Ham saw his father's nakedness, but was slow in reacting appropriately. Because our sages saw the entire episode as unfortunate and perhaps even bazaar they sought to adopt a veiled and vague version of what may have happened.

The obvious question that we ought to be raising is if it was such a disagreeable event why not censor it completely and excise it from our Masorah. Our tradition may have considered this option but reconsidered because with the convenience of Noah's curse the sages were able to rationalize Israel's conquering of Canaan centuries later.